

CHANGE
AND
CONTINUITY
IN THE
1996
ELECTIONS

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To Joseph A. Schlesinger

Preface



The political earthquake on November 8, 1994, brought the Republicans control of the U.S. House of Representatives for the first time in forty years and of the U.S. Senate for the first time in eight. These developments placed President Bill Clinton on the political defensive. Yet two years later he easily won reelection, the first Democratic president to do so since Franklin D. Roosevelt was reelected (for the third time) in 1944. Despite losing nine seats, the Republicans retained control of the House, and they gained two seats in the Senate. The 1996 contest was the first election since 1928 in which the Republicans had won control of the House in two consecutive elections. Moreover, 1996 was the first election in U.S. history in which the Democrats had won the presidency without gaining a majority in the House. Indeed, the Democrats had won the presidency in nineteen of the forty-two presidential elections held between 1828 and 1992, and in all nineteen of their victories they also won control of the House.

In 1988, with George Bush's election, the Republicans had won the presidency for three elections in a row, and many scholars argued that they were becoming the dominant party in presidential elections. What happened to Republican presidential dominance? What are the prospects for the Democrats to build a new presidential majority? And what happened to Democratic congressional dominance? What are the prospects for ending divided government between the Democrats and the Republicans, and which party is likely to end it? Have the major political parties weakened their hold on the U.S. electorate, and, if so, what are the prospects for a new political party?

To answer these questions, one cannot view the 1996 elections as isolated events; rather, one needs to study them in their historical context. To do this, we have examined a broad range of evidence, from past election results to public opinion surveys of the electorate conducted since 1944.

We employ many sources, but we rely most heavily on the 1996 survey of the American electorate conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies (SRC-CPS) of the University of Michigan as part of an ongoing project funded by the National Science Foundation. We use every one of the twenty-four election studies conducted by the Michigan SRC-CPS, often referred to as the National Election Studies (NES).

These surveys, which are disseminated by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), can be analyzed by scholars throughout the United States. The ICPSR provided these data in late April of 1997. Unless otherwise indicated, all the tables and figures in Chapters 2, 4 through 8, and 10 are based on surveys obtained through the ICPSR. The standard disclaimer holds: the consortium is not responsible for our analyses or interpretations.

Several institutions aided us financially. John H. Aldrich was a visiting professor at the Department of Government at Harvard University when this book was written, and he is grateful for its support. The Department of Political Science at Duke University also provided assistance. Paul R. Abramson and David W. Rohde received support from the Department of Political Science and the Political Institutions and Public Choice Program at Michigan State University. Rohde also received assistance from a Michigan State University fund for University Distinguished Professors.

Many individuals helped us with this effort. Bryan Marshall at Michigan State University assisted with the data analysis for Chapters 2, 9, and 10, and Mark Berger at Duke University assisted with the data analysis for Chapters 6, 7, and 8. Walter Dean Burnham at the University of Texas at Austin provided us with his estimates of turnout among the politically eligible population, and Martin O'Connell of the U.S. Bureau of the Census answered questions about the census survey of voter turnout.

Others helped us by commenting on several of these chapters. At Michigan State University, Darren W. Davis, Mark P. Jones, Michael Mintrom, Dennis Patterson, and Joseph A. Schlesinger provided numerous suggestions for Chapter 11. Jack Dennis at the University of Wisconsin, Robert E. O'Connor at Pennsylvania State University, and an anonymous reviewer provided us with extensive suggestions based on their reading of *Change and Continuity in the 1992 Elections*.

Once again we are thankful to the staff at CQ Press. Brenda Carter provided us with guidance in preparing our manuscript, Joanne S. Ainsworth copyedited our manuscript with exceptional scrutiny, and Talia Greenberg guided its production.

As with our four earlier books, this book was a collective enterprise, but we divided the labor. Abramson had the primary responsibility for Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 11; Aldrich for Chapters 1, 6, 7, and 8; and Rohde for Chapters 2,

9, and 10. We must also take some responsibility for the electoral outcome, since we all voted for Clinton. Yet, although each of us made several trips to the nation's capital during Clinton's first term, none of us slept in the Lincoln bedroom.

Paul R. Abramson
John H. Aldrich
David W. Rohde

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IN THE 1996 ELECTIONS

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PART 1

The 1996 Presidential Election



Presidential elections in the United States are partly ritual, a reaffirmation of our democratic values. But they are far more than ritual. The office confers great powers upon the occupant, and those powers have expanded during the course of American history. It is precisely because of these immense powers that presidential elections have at times played a major role in determining public policy.

The 1860 election, which brought Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans to power and ousted a divided Democratic party, focused on whether slavery should be extended into the western territories. Following Lincoln's election, eleven southern states attempted to secede from the Union, the Civil War erupted, and slavery itself was abolished. An antislavery plurality (Lincoln received only 40 percent of the popular vote) set in motion a chain of events that freed some four million African-Americans.

The 1896 election, in which the Republican William McKinley defeated the Democrat and Populist William Jennings Bryan, beat back the challenge of western and agrarian interests to the prevailing financial and industrial power of the East. Although Bryan mounted a strong campaign, winning 47 percent of the vote to McKinley's 51 percent, the election set a clear course for a policy of high tariffs and the continuation of a gold standard for American money.

The twentieth century also witnessed presidential elections that determined the direction of public policy. In 1936 the incumbent Democrat, Franklin D. Roosevelt, won 61 percent of the popular vote and his Republican opponent, Alfred M. Landon, only 37 percent, a margin that allowed the Democrats to continue to consolidate the economic, social, and welfare policies of the New Deal.

Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 landslide over the Republican Barry M. Goldwater provided the clearest set of policy alternatives of any election of this century. Johnson, who received 61 percent of the popular vote to Goldwater's 38 percent, saw his election as a mandate for his Great Society programs, the most far-reaching social legislation enacted since World War II.

Goldwater offered "a choice, not an echo," advocating far more conservative

social and economic policies than Johnson's. Ironically, the election also appeared to offer a choice between escalating American involvement in Vietnam and restraint. But American involvement expanded after the election, and four years later the Democrats lost the presidency.

WHAT DID THE 1996 ELECTION MEAN?

Only the future will determine the ultimate importance of the 1996 election. Some scholars argue that elections have become less important for deciding public policy, and there is doubtless some truth in their argument.¹ But presidential elections often do have important policy consequences. The 1996 election did not offer dramatic choices, mainly because after the Republican victories in the 1994 midterm election, Bill Clinton moved to the political center and did not offer dramatic new initiatives for his second term. If the "era of big government is over," as Clinton proclaimed in his State of the Union message in 1996, so too was the era of big new campaign promises. Clinton's signing of welfare reform legislation, opposed by many liberal Democrats, signaled a move to the political center as did his accepting the goal of balancing the budget by the year 2002. He also advocated some traditional positions on social values, such as the death penalty, school uniforms, and a "V-chip" to allow parents to control television programming.

But despite moving to the political center, he clearly differed from Bob Dole. Dole specifically proposed a program for a 15 percent across-the-board cut in the federal income tax, whereas Clinton wanted any tax cuts to be specifically targeted. Clinton was opposed to major changes in Medicare and Medicaid, was more supportive of environmental protection, and favored gun control. He wanted to reform, but continue, affirmative action. He differed markedly from Dole on abortion rights. His decision to veto a bill that would have made a late-term abortion procedure (often referred to as "partial birth" abortions) illegal led Dole to charge that Clinton favored "abortion on demand." Under the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, new Supreme Court appointments had come close to placing the *Roe v. Wade* decision, which prevents the states from outlawing abortion, in jeopardy. As Clinton's two Supreme Court appointments during his first term, Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Stephen Breyer, made clear, Clinton was committed to appointing justices who supported abortion rights. Moreover, voters who were disenchanted with the Republican and Democratic parties had the opportunity to vote for H. Ross Perot, now running as head of the newly formed Reform party.

Clinton won reelection easily, becoming the first Democrat to be reelected to the presidency since Franklin D. Roosevelt was reelected (for the third time) in 1944. But the Republicans held control of both the House and the Senate, the first time they had maintained control in two successive elections since 1928. Between 1828 and 1996, the Democrats had won the presidency twenty times,